

Public Debate on Urban Governance
Hazards Centre, Sanchal Foundation, Delhi
Final Report for 2003-04
April 2004

INTRODUCTION

The Hazards Centre of Sanchal Foundation is a professional support group providing consultancy services to mass and community organisations of the poor, or voluntary groups acting on their behalf.

On the basis of a review of the work done in the last five years, a project was proposed for 2003-2004, with the following objectives:

- **Comprehensive documentation of the development and governance processes that are affecting the urban poor.**
- **Publication of an Alternative Master Plan for Delhi to provide the basis for generating an extensive public debate on urban policies and governance modes.**
- **Intensive training and capacity building of organisations and alliances on request, for furthering the debate at the community level.**
- **Involvement of the media in propagating the debate on policies and governance so that a national perspective may develop on these issues.**

The work was initiated in April 2003 and the total annual budget was estimated at Rs 25 lakhs. Of this, Indians for Collective Action were kind enough to provide Rs 5.07 lakhs, while the National Foundation of India has given a grant of Rs 5.4 lakhs. The Hazards Centre has also been able to undertake related consultancy work in the last year, which has provided an additional Rs 6 lakhs. Hence, the shortfall for the year is about 34%.

WORK PROGRESS

This Report covers the progress of work from April 2003 to March 2004.

- **Community meetings:** Up to May 2003, the Hazards Centre facilitated 11 community meetings where information was shared at a mass level on issues of shelter, services, and governance. This was done through the Basti Abhiyan undertaken since early 2002 by the alliance of groups called the Sajha Manch. In March 2003, the Sajha Manch had undertaken a collective review and decided to suspend the Campaign from May 2003. Subsequently, the Hazards Centre focussed on encouraging the public debate on these issues through seminars, meetings, conferences, and demonstrations organised by other agencies and networks. Between May 2003 and March 2004, Hazards Centre personnel have participated in 126 such public events.

- **Workshops and Advocacy:** The Hazards Centre has continued with its capacity building efforts by organising workshops with activist and community groups on issues of specific relevance to them. 83 such workshops have been held in these twelve months and the local issues have covered transportation and road safety, electricity supply, disability, relocation and housing, workers' rights, waste management, elections and governance. In addition, larger issues of food security, heritage conservation, pollution, environment conservation, privatisation of services, health policy, women's empowerment, violence, and information technology have also evinced considerable interest. All these workshops have been with the Sajha Manch members or in collaboration with other groups.
- **Documentation and Alternative Plan:** Extensive documentation of the processes of governance that are affecting the urban poor has taken place during the course of the year. While all workshops and meetings have been documented, in addition, 30 surveys and trips have been made with the express purpose of data collection and photo-documentation. This has consolidated the work done in the previous four years and an Alternative People's Plan in Hindi has been published in November 2003, entitled "Dilli Kiski Hai". This focuses on eleven themes including land, housing, electricity, water, sanitation, health, education, employment, environment, governance, and community action. It is proposed to bring out an English edition by the middle of 2004. A list of other publications brought out by the Centre is attached.
- **Media Involvement:** Given the shortfall in funding, it has not been possible to invest in infrastructural development at the Hazards Centre. This has also delayed the proposal to develop an interactive Hindi website which would enhance social development at the community level. However, there has been some impact on the national debate on urban policies and governance, particularly through events like the World Social Forum in 2004 and the Assembly elections in 2003. Concerted attempts to involve the media have once again not met with much success. Even during the book release in November, there was no coverage in the English media and only some partial coverage in the Hindi press.

LESSONS LEARNT

A few important issues have emerged out of the year's experience, which have to be addressed in future:

- In spite of the continuing shortfall in funding, and the consequent limitations on infrastructural development, it has been possible to meet targets and carry out programmes with the enthusiastic co-operation of other groups and associations. However, the levels of interest and participation are flagging, partly because of the inability of the Hazards Centre to respond immediately, and partly because of the adverse socio-political environment. Thus, training and capacity building are getting limited response, with communities unable to see immediate fruits of their mobilisation efforts.

- This has been particularly noticeable in the case of the Yamuna Pushta evictions, which began in January 2004 and affected over 30,000 families. Even though there was some mobilisation in the early stages, it could not be sustained over time. Apart from the massive repression by the State, there was very little concern from the concerned Constitutional authorities. While the Hazards Centre supported six interventions in the Courts, and appeals to the National Human Rights Commission, Election Commission, and Governments, none of them drew any response, except for the NHRC.
- Although the Pushta evictions, the largest (and most brutal) since the 1975-76 Emergency, have recently drawn some attention from the International media, the Indian media remains indifferent to the plight of the urban poor. At best it echoes the views of the State and colludes in the criminalisation and marginalisation of the poor. It reinforces the prevailing view that the poor are a 'burden' on society. There has been some difference between the English and language press in this regard, but nevertheless, the major concern for both has been to focus on the 'modernisation' and 'globalisation' of India.
- Even in sympathetic fora such as the World Social Forum at Mumbai in January 2004, where one could expect a show of solidarity and alliance building, reasoned debate and consideration of future strategy have been at a premium. Some initiatives have emerged for the coming together of other groups from Kolkata, Hyderabad, Chennai, Mumbai, Indore, Jaipur, and Lucknow, but this is still concentrating on the issue of housing rights, rather than look at the changing economy of the city. The absence of an analytical perspective and, therefore, an intellectual appreciation of future strategy, is an issue of great concern.
- The thrust by the establishment forces to transform the cityscape in order to attract more foreign investment and display a "shining" India has been especially harsh on the lower classes. Not only is there a denial of the right to work, but also the rights to shelter, food, education, health, equality, and citizenship have been steadily eroded. Faced with such a powerful thrust, the levels of anxiety and insecurity in urban society have gone up sharply. People are being thrown to the margins and don't know where to turn. Alternative alliances, platforms, and solidarity organisations are not emerging. Even federations like the Sajha Manch are beginning to slow down.

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